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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents a variety of materials concerning Neil Simon's play "Laughter on the 23rd Floor." After a brief introduction to the play, the booklet presents a profile of the playwright, several lists of his accomplishments, information on his work for television, a quiz about plays, biographical information on the producer, director, actors and designers, and a 3-item list of additional readings. (RS)

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Spotlight on Theater Notes

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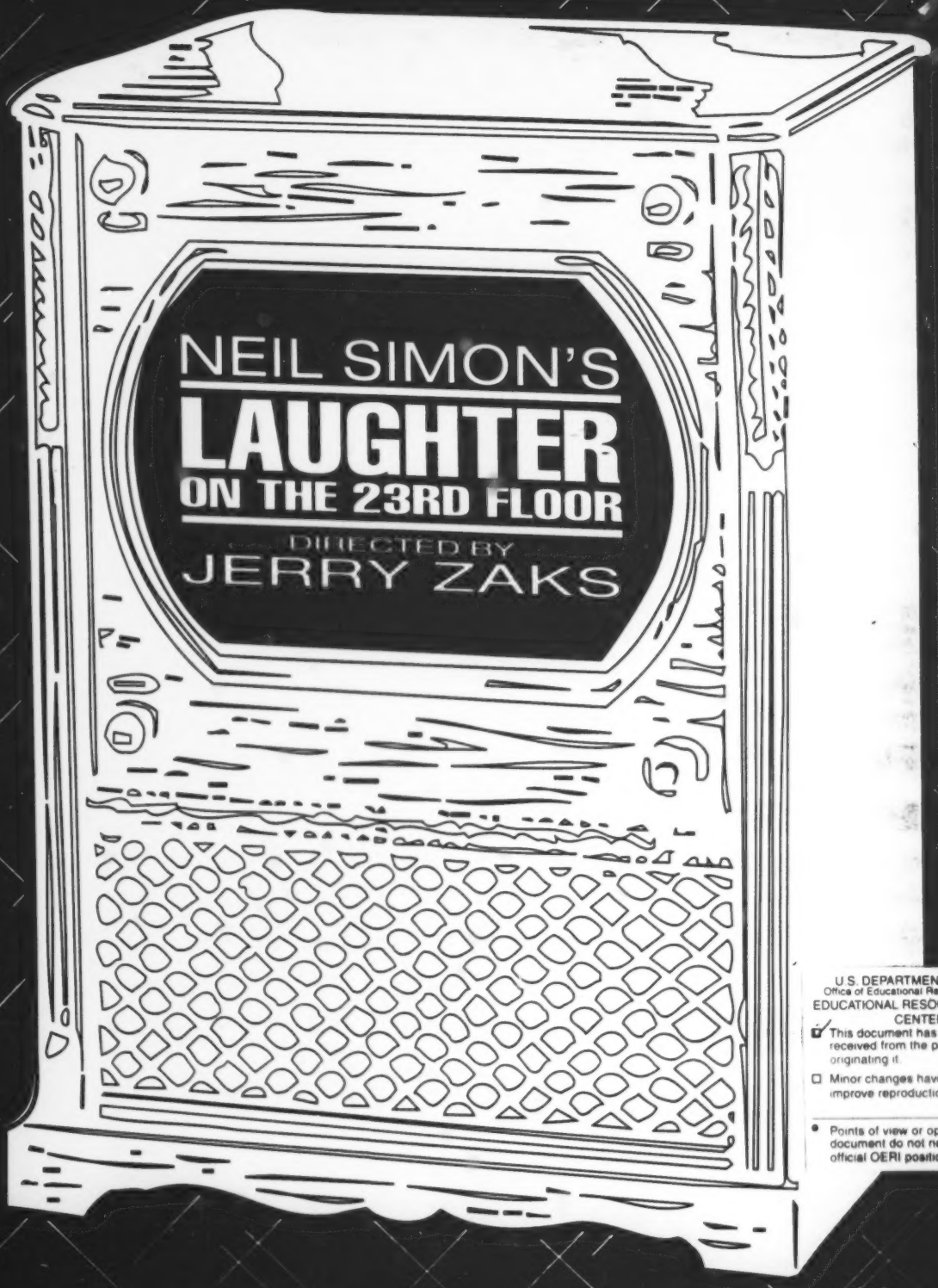

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Neil Simon's Notes on

LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR

In 1953, two extraordinary events happened in my life: I got married and became a writer on "Your Show of Shows," starring Sid Caesar. Both events made me extremely happy. I was 26 years old, and on the first day I went to work on the Caesar staff, I was awed by the gifts and talents of the other writers—Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Larry Gelbart (who went on to create "M*A*S*H"), Mel Tolkin, my brother Danny, and a few others. After two years on "Your Show of Shows," Sid Caesar moved on to have his own show, "Caesar's Hour," taking most of the writing staff with him. Sid Caesar was big in every way—in his size, his humor, his appetite, his anger, and his love of his writers. During this period, America was besieged by Communist hunters led by Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn. Writers, actors, directors, and everyone connected with the arts lived in fear of being put on their blacklist, which made you unemployable in television.

For television viewers of a certain age,

"Your Show of Shows" was a weekly addiction. An hour-long variety show starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, it claimed the major share of audience attention on Saturday evenings from 1950 to 1954. Besides Neil Simon, writers for the show who went on to other considerable successes included Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Larry Gelbart.

The play *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (our offices were in a high-rise building in New York) is a picture that closely resembles the real life that went on in the writers' room. Mostly we laughed, talked, argued, and ate, anything to put off the inevitable writing. But when we worked we burned the midnight oil, and sometimes burned the drapes and desktops as well. There is very little exaggeration in the play. There was also very great pressure on all of us to deliver on the air, as NBC feared our show was too esoteric, too smart for the new rural audiences who were getting their first TVs. This pressure was mostly felt by Sid Caesar, who began to take tranquilizers and Scotch to calm his nerves. But it never held back his anger in dealing with less-than- intelligent network executives and threats to America by men like Senator McCarthy.

I've always believed humor is fed by conflict. We had our share of both, and I hope that *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* will give you an intimate picture and a front row seat as to what went on in the writers' room in the early '50s.

"If Broadway ever erects a monument to a patron saint of laughter, Neil Simon will have to be it."

Lists are sometimes the best way to put Neil Simon's accomplishments in perspective. Lists on this and the next three pages try to do that.

Images of cornucopias,

never-emptying cups, and Niagara Falls come to mind when one considers Neil Simon's prolific writing.

His first widely seen theatrical work was as co-writer with his brother, Danny, for sketches they contributed to the Broadway musicals *Catch a Star* (1955) and *New Faces* (1956). Since 1961 he has supplied Broadway with one hit show after another. Here is a list of Simon's 27 plays to date. How many have you seen?

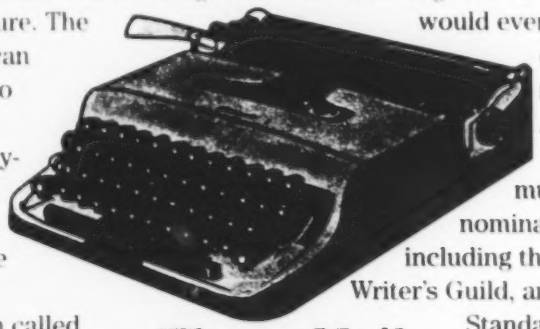
Barefoot in the Park
Biloxi Blues
Brighton Beach Memoirs
Broadway Bound
California Suite
Chapter Two
Come Blow Your Horn
Fools
The Gingerbread Lady
God's Favorite Little Me
The Good Doctor
The Goodbye Girl
I Ought to Be in Pictures
Jake's Women
Last of the Red Hot Lovers
Laughter on the 23rd Floor
Little Me
Lost in Yonkers
The Odd Couple
Plaza Suite
The Prisoner of Second Avenue
Promises, Promises
Rumors
The Star Spangled Girl
The Sunshine Boys
Sweet Charity
They're Playing Our Song

This spring his 28th show, *London Suite*, will open off-Broadway.

Neil Simon: "Sitting Alone in a Room"

"I am the most alive and most fulfilled sitting alone in a room, hoping that those words forming on the paper in the Smith-Corona will be the first perfect play ever written in a single draft."

Thus spake Neil Simon in 1979, in the introductory essay to an anthology of his plays. Nothing that has happened in the intervening 16 years seems to have changed that fascinating disclosure. The most popular of American playwrights continues to surprise and delight audiences with the funny-sad observations that he and the Smith-Corona turn out—single draft or not.



Although he has been called a "laugh machine," a "wisecracker," and a master of "one-line zingers," Simon has always shown us—between, in, and around the lines—what London critic Herbert Kretzmer calls "the pain, aspiration, and panic behind all those flip phrases."

One of the secrets of Simon's success lies in the fact that his humor starts, as he puts it, "with characters." And since, with few exceptions, his plays are his autobiography, he knows those characters well. His experiences throughout his life and his relationships with and observations of his family, friends, and acquaintances all appear in various guises.

Simon himself appears many times, most notably as Buddy in *Come Blow Your Horn*, as George in *Chapter Two*, and as Eugene in *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Broadway Bound*. Amalgams of himself and his brother, Danny, appear elsewhere, as they do in the character of Lucas in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. Simon's parents, wives, and former co-workers turn up in other plays.

Born in the Bronx in 1927, Simon began his career writing for an Army camp newspaper. After discharge, he became a mailroom clerk for Warner Bros.' New York office. Soon he was writing for radio, providing material for Robert Q. Lewis and Tallulah Bankhead, and then for television, where he put words in the mouths of Phil Silvers, Jackie Gleason, Red Buttons, Garry Moore, and, most famously, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.

After he and his brother provided sketches for two Broadway revues in the 1950s, he gave his attention to becoming a full-time playwright. With *Come Blow Your Horn* in 1961, he began a succession of plays that would eventually make him the creator of more hit shows than anyone in American theater history.

Simon has received multiple award nominations and awards, including the Tony, Emmy, Oscar, Writer's Guild, and (London) Evening Standard. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. In 1975 he received a Special Tony Award for his "overall contribution to the theater." He has been profiled on the PBS series "American Masters."

Three Neil Simon plays

stand among the longest-running Broadway productions:

Barefoot in the Park
1,530 performances

Brighton Beach Memoirs
1,299 performances

Promises, Promises
1,281 performances

Realizing that Simon writes about himself and those he knows, and recognizing that his plays (and their screen adaptations) reach vast audiences, it is no wonder that his third wife, Diane Landers, required a pre-nuptial agreement that prevents him from writing about her or her daughter during her lifetime. So, although Simon has described himself as "that person sitting in the corner who's observing it all," we can forget about his sharing observations on his current domestic life.

In that case, where to next, Mr. Simon?

Not Only

does Neil Simon hold the playwriting record for the greatest number of hits in the American theater, but he also holds the record for the greatest number of plays adapted for film:

Come Blow Your Horn
Barefoot in the Park
The Odd Couple
The Star Spangled Girl
Last of the Red Hot Lovers
The Gingerbread Lady (under the title *Only When I Laugh*)
Plaza Suite
The Sunshine Boys
I Ought to Be in Pictures
The Prisoner of Second Avenue
Chapter Two
Brighton Beach Memoirs
Biloxi Blues
Broadway Bound
Lost In Yonkers

Additionally, the musical *Sweet Charity*, for which he wrote the book, was also filmed.

Neil Simon's original film scripts include:

After the Fox
The Out of Towners
The Goodbye Girl
(later adapted as a Broadway musical)
The Heartbreak Kid
Murder by Death
The Cheap Detective
Seems Like Old Times
Max Dugan Returns
The Slugger's Wife
The Lonely Guy

Name That Simon

For a man who has created and named something in the neighborhood of 200 characters, it seems appropriate that Neil Simon has been known by more than one name himself. He was born Marvin Neil Simon, was soon known simply as Neil, and later was called Doc by colleagues and friends.

Doc is a nickname of both respect and affection, bestowed on him for serving as uncredited "play doctor" for the ailing scripts of numerous other playwrights.

Make His Manhattan

No one has depicted life in New York City and its environs with more clarity, exactness, and humor than Neil Simon. The settings of the overwhelming majority of his plays are the East and West sides and uptown and downtown Manhattan—with excursions into the other boroughs.

Yes, he wanders afar now and then. To Biloxi, Mississippi (*Biloxi Blues*), to Russia (*The Good Doctor*), to Ukraine (*Fools*), to California (*California Suite, I Ought to Be in Pictures, The Star Spangled Girl*), and to London (the upcoming *London Suite*). But in his other plays—remember, there have been 27 of them produced in New York so far—it's Manhattan, Brighton Beach, Yonkers, Sneden's Landing (just north of Manhattan), and the North Shore of Long Island.

Apartments are the principal places in which Simon's characters love, fight, make up, connive, seek attention, kvetch, and say funny things. Dotted on the map, his plays are located in such places as Riverside Drive, Second Avenue, Upper Broadway, lower Central Park West, and the Upper East Side.

Laughter on the 23rd Floor is a rare exception to Simon's "life in the apartments of New York" scene. It is set entirely "on the 23rd floor of a building on 57th Street."

Since 1961,

when his first full-length play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, appeared on Broadway, Neil Simon has probably kept more stage actors employed than any other American writer in history. Here is a list of some of the stars who have appeared in Simon roles on Broadway. All of them are in addition to the names which appear in the play quiz on page 11.

Brooke Adams
Jack Albertson
Alan Alda
Debbie Allen
Lucie Arnaz
Matthew Broderick
James Coco
Victor Garber
Lee Grant
Tammy Grimes
Rosemary Harris
Judd Hirsch
Anne Jackson
Robert Klein
Jack Klugman
Linda Lavin
Sam Levene
Lorna Luft
Marsha Mason
Mercedes McCambridge
Rita Moreno
Phyllis Newman
Jerry Orbach
Christopher Plummer
Tony Randall
Joan Rivers
Frances Sternhagen
Gwen Verdon

Neil Simon as Adapter

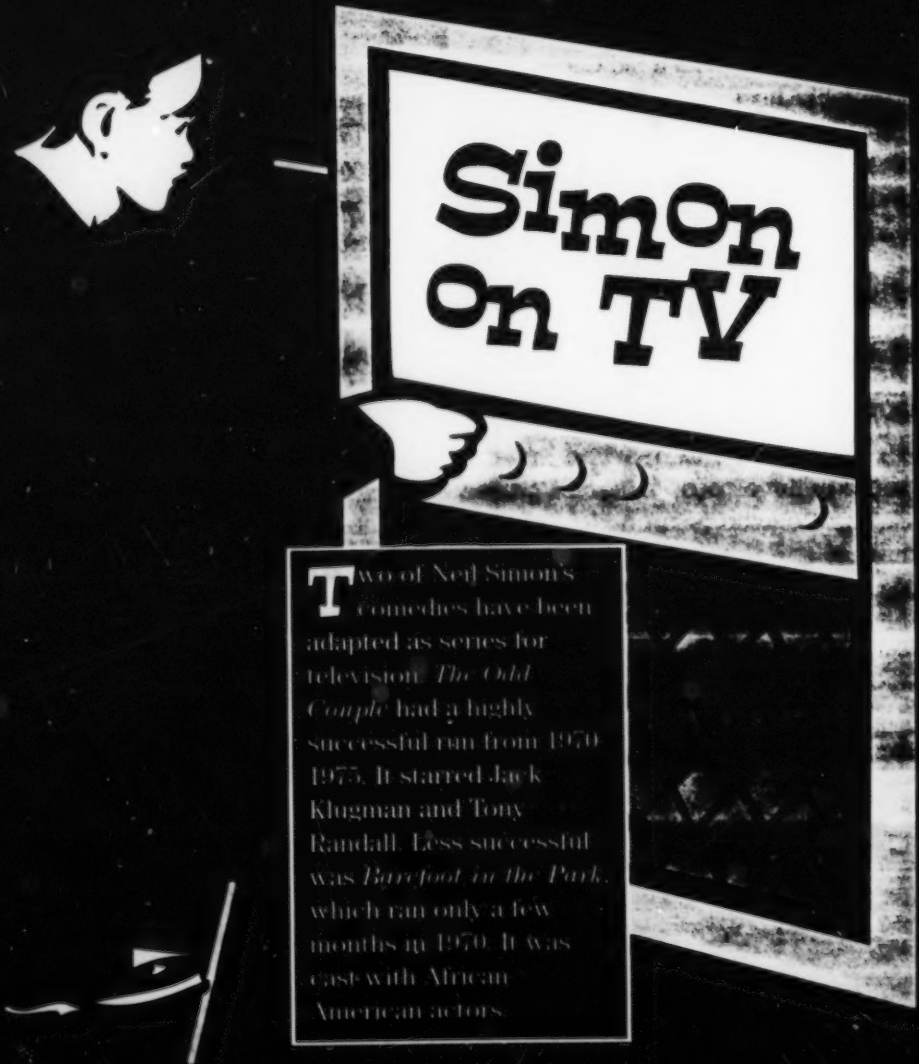
One of Neil Simon's hallmarks is his ability to generate one new plot after another. In only a few instances has he adapted the work of others. He turned to short stories by Anton Chekhov for the brief plays that make up *The Good Doctor*, and, in a big stretch, he turned to the Book of Job for the comedy *God's Favorite*.

Simon has adapted four works to create books for musicals. Federico Fellini's film *The Nights of Cabiria* was the inspiration for *Sweet Charity*; Patrick Dennis's novel *Little Me* was the jumping-off point for the musical of the same name (1962 and revised 1982); and Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond's filmscript for *The Apartment* served as the source for *Promises, Promises*.

Inspiring himself, he turned to his screenplay for *The Goodbye Girl* for the musical of the same name.

Neil Simon is "a shrewd observer of human foibles and a master of the surprise one-line gag."

—Gerald Bordman, *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Theatre*



Two of Neil Simon's comedies have been adapted as series for television. *The Odd Couple* had a highly successful run from 1970-1975. It starred Jack Klugman and Tony Randall. Less successful was *Barefoot in the Park*, which ran only a few months in 1970. It was cast with African American actors.

TV on Stage

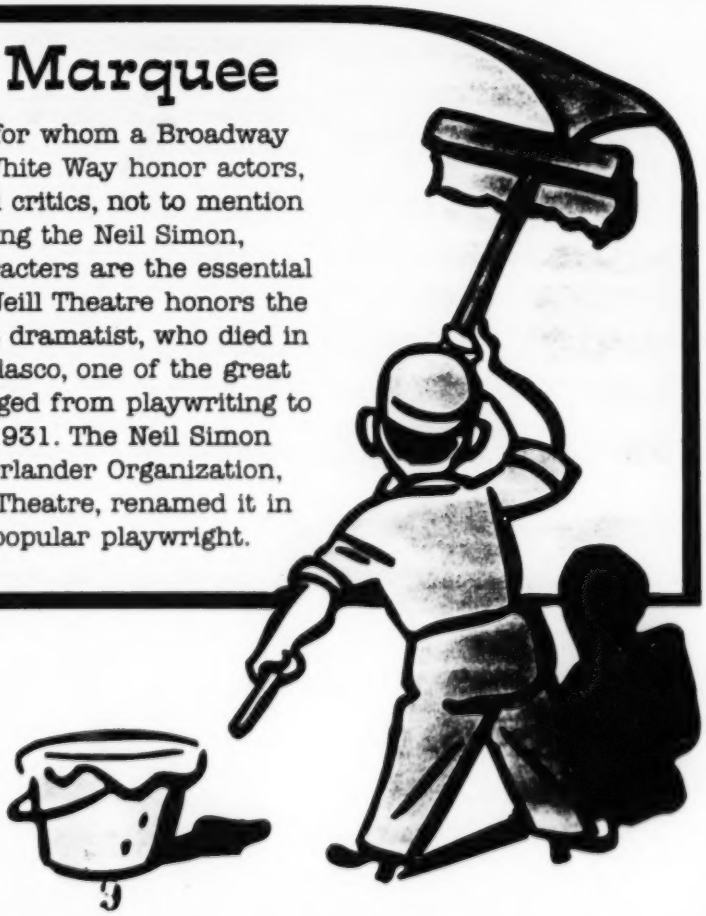
Although television has become a staple of everyday life, spawning stories about itself in every medium, it has seldom been the subject of stage productions. Two significant exceptions—both musicals—are *Top Banana* and *My Favorite Year*.

Top Banana, which appeared in 1951 and toured nationally the following year, starred Phil Silvers as a thinly disguised Milton Berle—Mr. Television of the 1950s and '60s.

My Favorite Year, originally a popular 1982 film, was adapted as a musical for the 1993 Broadway season. The show revolved around a '50s TV show with a Sid Caesar-like host.

His Name on the Marquee

Neil Simon is the only living playwright for whom a Broadway theater is named. Theaters on the Great White Way honor actors, producers, musical comedy composers, and critics, not to mention theater owners, but only three, including the Neil Simon, commemorate people whose plots and characters are the essential ingredients of playmaking. The Eugene O'Neill Theatre honors the man some believe to be America's greatest dramatist, who died in 1953. The Belasco is named for David Belasco, one of the great showmen of the theater, whose talents ranged from playwriting to directing to producing. Belasco died in 1931. The Neil Simon Theatre dates from 1983 when the Nederlander Organization, owner of what was previously the Alvin Theatre, renamed it in honor of America's most prolific and popular playwright.



Producer: Emanuel Azenberg

Playwright Neil Simon and producer Emanuel Azenberg have a professional marriage made in heaven. They have been happily tied to one another since 1972, when Azenberg produced *The Sunshine Boys*.

For better or worse—there have been a few disappointments, such as *Fools* and *God's Favorite*— Simon and Azenberg have kept themselves and Broadway audiences happy with hit after hit. Their latest collaboration is the production of Simon's newest script, *London Suite*, which will open in New York later this season.

While the theater community and Simon fans are used to a new play almost every year, they were not prepared for Azenberg's announcement that *London Suite* will be the first of Simon's plays produced off-Broadway. Pointing to the ever-growing costs of Broadway productions and the ever-lessening opportunity to earn a return on production investments, Azenberg grabbed headlines with his precedent-setting decision to present the show in a small theater, away from the theater district.

In addition to mounting 18 of Simon's plays, Azenberg is the respected producer of such shows as Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight!*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *Children of a Lesser God*, *Master Harold...and the Boys*, and *The Real Thing*. He also produced Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park With George* and *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*.

Azenberg's productions have earned 95 Tony Award nominations and 33 awards.

The professional marriage of Simon and Azenberg makes good sense. Azenberg points out that while Simon knows how to write plays like few others, "the business side of theater is a total mystery to him."

Director: Jerry Zaks

Kennedy Center audiences remember director Jerry Zaks' contributions to *Guys and Dolls*, *Lend Me a Tenor*, and *Wenceslas Square*. His productions of *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Anything Goes* were seen at the National Theatre.

Zaks, one of the most popular directors in the theater, has just opened his most recent Broadway show—the musical *Smokey Joe's Cafe*. Broadly recognized for his work, Zaks has received four Tonys, four Drama Desk Awards, two Outer Critics Circle Awards, an Obie, a Dramalogue Award, and an NAACP Image Award nomination. Resident Director of Lincoln Center Theatre from 1986-1990, Zaks is a founding member of New York's Ensemble Studio Theatre.

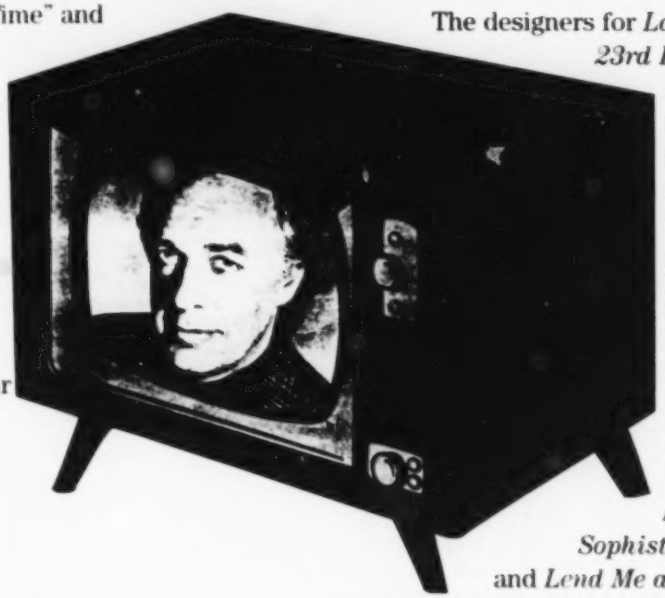
Zaks appeared on Broadway in the original productions of *Grease* and *Tintypes*.

Actor: Howard Hesseman

Howard Hesseman, who plays Max Prince — read Sid Caesar— in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, was heralded for his performance on television's "WKRP in Cincinnati," for which he received two Emmy Award nominations.

He also starred in two other television series, "One Day at a Time" and "Head of the Class." Additional television and film appearances have gained him increasing numbers of fans as well as critical plaudits.

On stage, Hesseman has appeared in Alan Ayckbourn's *Man of the Moment* and Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass*.



Actor: Lewis J. Stadlen

Lewis J. Stadlen makes a welcome return to the Kennedy Center, where he has starred in *Room Service*, *The Time of Your Life*, and *Guys and Dolls*. In *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* he plays Milt, the role he created in the Broadway production.

Other Neil Simon plays in which he has appeared are *The Sunshine Boys* and *The Odd Couple*. He is well-remembered as Dr. Pangloss in the 1974 revival of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*.

Stadlen received the Helen Hayes Award for his performance in Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at Arena Stage.

Three Top Designers

The designers for *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* are three of the top-flight behind-the-scenes artists in show business.

TONY WALTON's scene designs for *Guys and Dolls*, *The Will Rogers Follies*, *Grand Hotel*, *Pippin*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, and *Lend Me a Tenor* have been seen at the Kennedy Center. His awards shelf holds Tonys, Drama Desk Awards, an Emmy, and Oscar nominations. He was elected to the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1991.

WILLIAM IVEY LONG's costume designs for *Guys and Dolls* and *Lend Me a Tenor* have been seen at the Kennedy Center. His costumes for the upcoming *Crazy for You* are one of the show's delights. He has costumed Liza Minnelli, Patti La Belle, Mick Jagger, and Siegfried and Roy.

THARON MUSSER's lighting designs have been seen at the Kennedy Center in *The Secret Garden*, *A Chorus Line*, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *42nd Street*, and *Pacific Overtures*.

In addition to her designs for plays and musicals, she has provided lighting for the Jose Limon Dance Company, the Dallas and Miami opera companies, and American Ballet Theatre. Musser has received three Tony Awards.

A Play Quiz

Film adaptations of Neil Simon's plays have frequently starred actors different from those who originated the roles on Broadway. So many actors have performed in touring, stock, regional, and dinner theater productions of the plays that it's hard to keep up. For what Simon works were the actors listed below the original stars on Broadway? How many of the plays have been seen at the Kennedy Center?

1. Art Carney and Walter Matthau were the original stars of this comedy, which may be Simon's most popular play.

2. In what musical did these four later-famous dancers appear as members of the chorus: Donna McKechnie, Baayork Lee, Margo Sappington, and Graciele Daniele?

3. Irene Worth won the Tony Award for Best Supporting Actress and Mercedes Reuhl won the award for Best Actress for their mother-daughter portrayals in this Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

4. Richard Benjamin, Connie Stevens, and Anthony Perkins appeared in this not-too-successful 1966 comedy about an ultra-conservative girl who is pursued by two ultra-liberal suitors.

5. Sid Caesar played seven roles in this musical based on a Patrick Dennis novel of the same name.

6. Martin Short and Bernadette Peters appeared in this 1993 musical adaptation of Simon's 1977 film.

7. Jason Alexander, one of the stars of TV's "Seinfeld," was a featured actor in this comedy about Eugene Jerome's start in show business.

8. Robert Redford made his last Broadway appearance opposite Elizabeth Ashley in this 1963 comedy, set in a fifth-floor walk-up.

9. George C. Scott and Maureen Stapleton appeared in this "suite" play.

10. TV's Columbo, Peter Falk, had the urban blues in this 1971 hit.

Answers on page 12.

The Kennedy Center

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Writer: John C. Carr
Production Photos: Carol Rosegg

Answers to Play Quiz, p. 11

1. *The Odd Couple*
2. *Promises, Promises*
3. *Lost in Yonkers*
4. *The Star Spangled Girl*
5. *Little Me*
6. *The Goodbye Girl*
7. *Broadway Bound*
8. *Barefoot in the Park*
9. *Plaza Suite*
10. *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*

None of these shows has played the Kennedy Center.

Give yourself one point for each correct answer. Total: 10 points.

10-9: You're "Broadway Bound"

8-6: O.K., "Come Blow Your Horn"

5-3: You're "Barefoot in the Park"

2-0: You're "Lost in Yonkers"

The Spotlight on Theater discussion will be held on Thursday, April 13, from 6-6:45 p.m. in the Eisenhower Theater.